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The Rise and Decline of the New England Conference

by

Betty Messerschmidt

The following article was drawn from a paper written in 1951, but it contains valuable information on the little-known New England Conference from a daughter of one of the longtime ministers in the conference. The paper has been shortened significantly by the editor. As many readers know, Betty and her husband, Lowell, were missionaries to Africa. After a long and productive life, Betty died in 2014.

The origins of the New England Conference of the Evangelical Association¹ can be traced primarily to the heated controversy over the holiness movement that raged in the latter part of the 19th century. A number of clergymen from the Methodist Episcopal Church [MEC] led by Rev. Joshua Gill considered separating from their denomination. They did not want to start a new denomination, but were led to consider the Evangelical Association through contacts with the National Holiness Association.

As a result, Rev. Gill and four others visited the East Pennsylvania annual conference. At its 1893 session the Conference welcomed Rev. Gill, who was described later as “the veteran leader of the New England Holiness movement,”² and other MEC clergy who were troubled by the lack of emphasis on Wesley’s concept of entire sanctification in the ME denomination. Later S.P. Spreng explained the development of the New England Mission thusly: “This remarkable movement is the direct outcome of the opposition to the doctrine of holiness which is strongly manifested in the Methodist Episcopal and other churches of New England.”³

Shortly after Rev. Gill’s visit the East Pennsylvania Conference established New England as a Mission. The supervision of the Mission was put under the Allentown district of the Conference. Its presiding elder, Rev. W.A. Leopold, visited the area a few months later and commented: “At last the Evangelical Association has a foothold in ‘Yankeedom’ in Massachusetts

and Rhode Island.”⁴ He credited Rev. Gill and his publication, “The Christian Witness and Advocate of Bible Holiness” as a major reason for the early success of the mission.

The initial encouragement of the East Pennsylvania Conference did not include financial support. It was not long before Rev. Leopold made a strong appeal to the entire denomination for such support, in particular for the fledgling congregation in Boston. “We must not lose this grand opening in the Great City of Culture. Gladly would the East Pennsylvania Conference add this mission to its ever-increasing beneficiaries, but for the greatly increased demands upon our people who at many places have been put in consequence of the wicked revolt, led by disloyal and scheming preachers. Will not the undivided Church take up this Boston work?”⁵

Within the year the next conference session reported a gain of 217% in membership in the New England churches. Six ministers joined the Evangelical Association at that session.⁶ In recognition of the growth of the work, the New England Mission extended an invitation to the East Penn Conference to have its 1896 conference in Boston. Considering the travel difficulties Pennsylvania members would have in attending the conference in Boston, it was decided to create a new conference in the area.

Thus, the initiating session of the New England Conference took place on Thursday, March 19, 1896, in the Jesse Lee Chapel in Boston on West Springfield Street near Tremont.

Bishop Thomas Bowman presided over the conference. "The religious services were intensely spiritual and also intensely practical, as one might expect them to be among these Yankees. They are not afraid of emotional outbreaks, and shouts are frequent in the camp. But they also insist upon thorough, intelligent, practical work."⁷ At the time there were 16 churches in the conference and they were divided into two districts—the Boston District and the Cambridge District.

In no surprise, Joshua Gill was elected one of the presiding elders. His initial contact with the Evangelical Association [EA] had come in 1892 when he was invited to hold a holiness camp meeting with EA people in northeastern Ohio. There he met Bishop S.C. Breyfogel and was impressed with "the friendly attitude of the Evangelical Association toward the doctrine and experience of Holiness."⁸

Rev. Gill was born in Barnet, Vermont, on August 16, 1834. He was converted at the age of 21 in a MEC in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. Three years later he entered the conference seminary. While serving a church at Northfield, Vermont, he became interested in Wesley's concept of entire sanctification and found the experience in about 1866. Thereafter he preached extensively on the subject ". . . in a clear and definite manner."⁹ Later he transferred to the New England Conference of the MEC. He eventually completed a theological course at Boston University, but it was not until 1893 that he severed his connection with the MEC and joined the EA.

His initial assignment with the EA was to develop a church in Boston. The church was organized on May 25, 1893, with 12 members. When he moved from that church in 1900 it had over 100 members and a church building valued at \$11,000.¹⁰ In 1901, because of ill health, Rev. Gill was relieved of pastoral responsibilities, but continued as a presiding elder. In 1904, however, his health was such that he had to give up that position.¹¹ After a number of strokes, he died on September 25, 1907, at the age of 74.¹²

One of Rev. Gill's major goals, the establishment of a college, never materialized. He summarized his need for a college in the 1897 conference journal: "We want a safe place

to send our boys and girls to be educated, and where our future ministers can receive that instruction which will fit them for our ministry, where the higher criticism and evolution and semi-infidelity will find no sympathy and where holiness to the Lord will receive due attention."

Another early leader of the New England Conference was Dr. Jason C. Briggs. Dr. Briggs accompanied Rev. Gill to the East Penn Conference session in 1893 and at the time was apparently licensed as a preacher on trial. Rev. Briggs was never a fulltime pastor, but combined his practice of dentistry with his pastoral calling in the Somerville area of Massachusetts. He, too, suffered health problems and retired from the pastorate in 1908 or 1909. He died on December 15, 1914.

Rev. David F. Burns also accompanied Rev. Gill to the 1893 conference and eventually served as pastor of the oldest church in the conference. The Cambridge Church was organized on December 18, 1892, with 17 members. Eventually serving as presiding elder, Rev. Burns was well known throughout the conference and was a major leader in camp meetings. He combined his church roles with that of a contractor and builder in the Cambridge area. Rev. Burns, whose favorite poet was Robert Burns, died on December 10, 1928.

The longest serving early pastor was Rev. Leonard W. Malcolm. He, too, came from the MEC where his experience of entire sanctification and his rather vocal testimony to the same led his fellow worshippers to attempt to "sing him down." Since Rev. Malcolm was a large man with a deep and powerful voice that was not easy to do. He was known primarily for his superintendence of the Silver Lake Camp Meeting where he did more than anyone else to make the camping experience memorable for those who attended. He came to the EA in 1894 and did not retire until 1942 after 48 years of service. He died two years later.

At the time the New England Conference was initiated the roll of preachers included: Elders Joshua Gill and John N. Short [presiding elders], Aaron Hartt, Henry H. Perry, W.E. Fredericks, George N. Buell, and Robert Pierce. Deacons were David F. Burns, Jason D. Briggs, Leonard W. Malcolm, Alton B. Clark (who also attended

the 1893 East Penn Conference), Newton W. Shaw, Andrew Hyden, and George Haddow. Active preachers on trial were George E. Noble, Charles E. Doty, and Joseph A. Ward. Local preachers were J.A. Clark, A.W. Morrell, Magnus Larson, and James T. Webber. Most of the elders and perhaps the deacons as well appear to have come from the MEC. Over the years, however, some ministers came from other denominations. Charles W. Cory (father of the author), for instance, was a recorded minister in the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

The statistics for the New England Conference found in the 1896 Conference journal indicate clearly why most of these ministers could not fill a pastorate on a fulltime basis. The highest annual salary was \$1,612 and that was divided between Rev. Burns and Rev. Short at the Cambridge Church with 133 members. The next highest salary was Rev. George Buell's \$676 at the Central Falls, Rhode Island, church with a membership of 83. Rev. Gill's charge only provided a salary of \$130 with a total membership of 72. The total of all pastoral salaries in the Conference was \$4,891.06.

The 16 churches or fields were: Jesse Lee in Boston and Brookline (72 members), First Swedish in Boston (39), East Boston (16), Charlestown (17), Cambridge (133), Chelsea (11), Somerville (34), Salem (16), New Bedford (22), Stoneham (15), and Everett (50), all in Massachusetts. Pawtucket (22) and Central Falls (83) were in Rhode Island, and the others were Montpelier, Vermont (44), Woodville, New Hampshire (3), and Kingfield, Maine (33). Total membership in all 16 churches was only 620. Little wonder that only the Brookline church and the Maine church (it must have been small because it was valued at only \$800) owned their own buildings. The other congregations either rented a building (such as the Jesse Lee Chapel in Boston where the rent was \$40-50 a month) or met in members' homes.

Between 1897 and 1947 seventeen additional churches were organized. In Massachusetts they were Lynn (organized in 1897), Revere (1898), Lowell (1907), Westport Factory (1908), Fall River (1908), Medford (1915), Adams Shore/Quincy (1917), and East Wareham (1923).

Two churches were established in Connecticut at New Haven (1897) and Bridgeport (1898). Vermont had three: East Montpelier (1901), Topsham (1901), and Barre (1902). Wells (1899), Salem (1906), and West New Portland (1947) were in Maine. Finally, in 1907 the Conference went international with the founding of a church in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia.¹³

All but four of the churches in the New England Conference were founded within a span of 16 years and only one was founded after 1923. The 1890s and the early years of the 20th century was an era when the holiness movement in the United States was particularly strong. It was primarily on this theology that the Conference was founded and flourished. Rev. John Short, one of the initial presiding elders of the conference made this clear: "It is a time when the New England market is glutted with a supply of what many call 'advanced ideas of the religious life.' Our position, however, is unique; for we stand midway between cold-blooded Unitarianized orthodoxy on the one hand, in nearly all so-called orthodox churches, and on the other hand, peculiar ideas of holiness, which either stop short of full salvation from sin in the heart, or if taking this position of complete salvation from sin, yet coupling it on to other doctrines, which become the rallying cry, the true shibboleth and criterion by which one's acceptability is determined."¹⁴

Short continued: "To hold the simple Wesleyan doctrine of holiness, the destruction of the carnal mind, through an intelligently instructed faith, entire consecration, and the incoming of the Holy Spirit, and then to be content with this experience only, is to be ostracized by all who hold the modified view of holiness quite as much as by the cold, worldly orthodoxy of the day . . . It requires wisdom to sail between the rock on the one side, and not get wrecked; to avoid the whirlpool on the other, and not get swallowed up. The simple idea of holiness, and corresponding character-building, which was good enough for the fathers does not seem to meet the desires of many today who are not satisfied with cold, formal, worldly orthodoxy."¹⁵

A year earlier, Rev. Gill explained the mission of the conference thusly: "Our church is

small and is doing a pioneer work. We are not wanted by existing churches, but we are needed, for we offer a Savior who saves from all sin in the present tense. We make a specialty of holiness for two reasons: first, because we have a conviction of duty based upon the teaching of the Bible, and secondly, because no other kind of preaching will insure spiritual success. . . we have demonstrated that a radical, sin-killing gospel does succeed. . . Holiness is the warp and woof of our success.”¹⁶ This heavy emphasis on entire sanctification combined with the enthusiasm and vigor of the early preachers in the New England Conference account primarily for its success.

But growth was elusive. In 1896 there were 21 ministers in the conference. That number rose to a high of 38 in 1907 and 1910. In 1918 there were 25 clergy with the number never getting above 30 in the 1920s. By 1939 there were only 19 ministers listed in the NECJ and in 1950 only 14. The turnover of clergy was heavy. Almost every year from one to half a dozen new ministers would be received. The majority came from the MEC with a few from other Methodist groups. The second largest number appears to have come from the Church of the Nazarene (itself a split from the MEC).

Every year ministers left the Conference going mostly to the MEC or Church of the Nazarene—some honorably and some not so honorably. In fact the relatively small New England Conference had more than its share of controversy. In the first conference session an elder was “dismissed at his own request because of differences of doctrinal belief.”¹⁷ One of the first two presiding elders, Rev. John Short, had charges preferred against him (and three others) in the 1900 annual conference.¹⁸ Two factors seem to have caused the problem with Short. He did not want to itinerate and a personal dispute developed between him and Rev. David Burns—his co-pastor. Rev. Gill reported: “In July and August I heard rumors that Brother Short was intending to withdraw from our work, take his church and the church property with him into the so-called Pentecostal body of Christians.”¹⁹

This separation became personal as Short attacked Burns and his family as well as Rev. Gill. Gill continued: “Since that date, however, it has been alleged that he [Short] has done much

to prejudice people against us, and me in particular, conniving at the disloyalty of others of our ministry and membership.”²⁰ Short was not able to take the church building with him, although he did take about 135 of the 185 members. The church treasurer refused to report on the congregation’s finances and Rev. Gill estimated that \$2,000-4,000 was lost. To make matters worse at the time charges were brought against Rev. Short he was still a presiding elder.

Interestingly enough, the animosity was soon forgotten. Rev. Short of the Pentecostal Church reappeared at the 1907 New England Annual Conference (albeit after Rev. Gill’s death) and “made a few pleasant remarks.” A resolution was then passed thanking him and the members of his church for “assisting our local pastor in providing for our entertainment and comfort.”²¹ In a response to the question “Do you preach holiness?” Rev. Short replied: “I preach the truth” leaving open the reality that anyone with whom he disagreed was NOT preaching the truth. In such circumstances disagreements rise to the level of immorality quickly.

Rev. Aaron Hartt, one of the founding elders of the Conference, was more successful in detaching the Everett congregation from the Conference. In 1900 he succeeded in talking the congregation into forming a Pentecostal congregation. They occupied the church building and apparently no legal effort was made by the EA to recover it. The congregation was deeply in debt and Hartt used the curious argument that it was not wrong to take property belonging to another that was in debt. To this Rev. Gill remarked: “Such sophistry is worthy of a Jesuit, but not of a Protestant Christian or any one claiming to be an honest man.”²² Two licensed preachers of the Conference apparently “jumped ship” with Hartt. Rev. Gill also believed, and perhaps justifiably so, that other ministers of the Pentecostal Church were partially responsible for these defections.²³ With all of this “disloyalty” it is little wonder that Rev. Gill’s health was broken by 1901.

While the first decade of the history of the New England Conference was rent by disagreements, it was also during this period that most of the growth seemed to take place. From the 620 members in 1896 the membership only

grew to 840 in the following 50-plus years. The number of ministers actually declined from 21 to 14 by 1950 with only 11 congregations. A logical question was, Why the decline?

There were clearly a number of factors responsible for the decline. Many of the churches were formed by groups who could no longer find in their churches what they considered the true "Methodist doctrine." So they withdrew and formed small congregations within the EA. Some of these preachers became dissatisfied (for what reasons it is unclear) with the EA and led their followers out again. Churches in Everett, Cambridge, New Bedford, Pawtucket, and Yarmouth were split in this manner and most never recovered.

In some cases immoral conduct by clergy weakened the congregations while in others chronic division-makers, such as the minister who caused friction in three successive churches—Salem (Maine), Somerville, and Everett—were to blame. A few churches wanted a more congregational system and resisted efforts to accept ministers assigned to them—or any authority from the conference level. In other cases, such as Lynn, Fall River, and Lowell, shifting populations isolated the churches in an area of changing population—often foreigners. Apparently there was an unwillingness to work with these new residents and the churches gradually withered. One of the conference journals asked the question: Why not work with the foreigners in our midst rather than sending missionaries to foreign lands?

Many of the Conference's churches were small and could not support a fulltime pastor. Consequently they were supplied by part-time pastors or students from Boston University and other local colleges and seminaries. While some of these people were quite good, most did not have the long term interests of the congregations or the conference in mind. They frequently propagated new, and perhaps unwelcome, ideas and experimented with new methods. Many of them did not preach with a conviction of full salvation (entire sanctification), a view that was gradually falling out of favor within the EA. With little in the way of a distinctive message, what was the value of the churches of the New England Conference?

For many years one of the major binding forces within the Conference were the camp meetings at Silver Lake, Massachusetts, and Salem, Maine. With the passing of more and more of the spiritual stalwarts who gave their time and talents to the camps, this binding force was eroded. Salem camp declined and was closed in the early 1940s. While the Silver Lake camp meetings continued for a longer period of time other holiness camps closer to the local churches were more accessible, were larger, and had more attractive programs. Furthermore, the loss of interest in camping among the broader church also weakened the impact of the camps.

But it is hard to escape the belief that the major reason for the decline of the New England Conference was the gradual de-emphasis on entire sanctification (holiness) that affected the entire EA and the later Evangelical and EUB denominations. Newer ministers who were seminary-trained were not interested in maintaining the theology, if not the zeal, of people like Rev. Gill. With its major reason for existence receding into the background, the conference gradually disappeared.

Nonetheless the Conference made significant contributions to the broader denomination. Over the years more than \$250,000 was contributed to the general Missionary Society—a major amount for so small a conference. The conference displayed more diversity among its members than many larger conferences. Among the early churches was the First Swedish Church of Boston where apparently some of the services

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were in Swedish and part of the *Discipline* was translated into Swedish. The East Wareham Church welcomed Portuguese immigrants and African-Americans—while not numerous—were members of a number of congregations. Mrs. Henrietta Brothers was an influential member of the Lynn Church. Thomas Saunders, a baritone singer of renown in the Boston area, and his family were members of the Fall River Church. The Cambridge Church, however, through the years had probably the largest number of African-American members.

Several African-Americans were licensed by the Conference. In 1915 Stephen G. Spottswood was licensed as a preacher on trial. He attended Schuylkill College in Reading, Pennsylvania,²⁴ for a time. Although his name was omitted from the ministers in 1916, in 1919 he was voted a “letter of standing” to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Said to be a brilliant-minded man of large vocabulary, he was a successful pastor of a Washington, D.C. church for a number of years. Rev. Fordyce H. Storms was also licensed as a preacher on trial in 1916. Until 1938 he did evangelistic work in other denominations, often in white-only churches, but while he might have supplied some churches in the New England Conference, it does not appear that he was ever appointed to a charge.

Some ministers in the Conference transferred to other denominations or EA conferences (probably because there were better opportunities in larger conferences) while others became active in educational work. Rev. Dr. Harry A. DeWire, for instance, served a church in the Conference while he was completing his doctoral work at Boston University. For many years he was a professor at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. Rev. Dr. Harold R. Heininger, president of Evangelical Theological Seminary and later an EUB bishop served the Fall River Church in the early 1920s.

Sons and daughters of New England Conference parsonages served as pastors, conference superintendents, and missionaries across the denomination. The influence of the holiness movement can be seen in the educational choices some of the young people of

the Conference made: Gordon College of Theology, Cleveland Bible College, Eastern Nazarene College, and Taylor University (Indiana). But others attended Evangelical Theological Seminary in Naperville, Illinois, and MEC schools like Boston and Drew universities.

Thus over the years, despite its small size, the New England Conference has had an influence that seems larger than its numbers. Today it appears that only three or four churches of the conference remain, although it is difficult to determine the exact number because of the mergers and name changes that have taken place over the years.²⁵

¹ By this time the Evangelical Association had split into the majority (the Association) and the minority (the United Evangelical Church). The split was partially an outgrowth of disagreements over entire sanctification.

² *Evangelical Messenger* (hereinafter cited as *EM*), March 14, 1893, 164.

³ *EM*, March 25, 1896, 200.

⁴ *EM*, July 11, 1893, 435.

⁵ *EM*, September 25, 1893, 468.

⁶ *EM*, March 6, 1894, 153.

⁷ *EM*, March 25, 1896, 200.

⁸ *New England Conference Journal* (hereinafter cited as *NECJ*), p. 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹¹ *NECJ*, 1904, p. 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹³ The information came from the *NECJ* for the respective years.

¹⁴ *NECJ*, 1898, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *NECJ*, 1897, p. 12.

¹⁷ *NECJ*, 1895, p. 7.

¹⁸ *NECJ*, 1900, p. 4.

¹⁹ *NECJ*, 1900, pp. 11-12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *NECJ*, 1907, pp. 13, 29.

²² *NECJ*, 1900, pp. 13-14.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

²⁴ In the late 1920s Schuylkill College merged with Albright College (Myerstown) and the combined school was known then and now as Albright College.

²⁵ As editor I did a cursory check of current United Methodist materials to try to determine how many of the New England Conference churches still exist. It was not a careful review and I would be glad to hear from readers who can provide further information on specific churches that might still be in existence from the conference.

An Exchange Student in Germany

by
Ehrhardt Lang

Ehrhardt Lang is a retired United Methodist pastor living in California. His parents were natives of Germany and were missionaries to Japan, living there through World War II. The story of his family can be found in an article titled "EUB Missionary by Adoption" in the Telescope-Messenger (Vol. 20, #1, Winter 2010).

In 1960 I went as an exchange student from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, to the Reutlingen EUB (*Evangelische Gemeinschaft*) Seminary in West Germany. The seminary was a one-building institution at that time with an all-male student body. Seminarians came from all over Germany, except for Communist East Germany, and Switzerland. Most of the students were from cities where EUB churches had been established. All of us lived in the dormitory section of the main building and ate together at appointed times. There were no married students, and under seminary rules students were not permitted to marry until after graduation. Even dating was not allowed.

Other rules pertained to such things as rest times and quarter-mile walks immediately after lunch. I do not remember any regulations regarding the use of alcohol, but there was no excessive drinking at the seminary. On group hikes in the countryside stops were made occasionally at small pubs where students did drink beer, but not excessively.

It was my recollection of the occasional beer on the part of the German students that brings to mind a special memory of my year in Germany. Since I was an exchange student from the United States, I was invited to attend the meeting of the German Annual Conference. The presiding American bishop was Harold Heininger and I was seated next to him at the Pastor's banquet. This was a high privilege for me because he and I were able to engage in much informal conversation.

Bishop Heininger and I soon observed that every pastor, except for the Bishop and me, were served a tall glass of beer. Since no apologies were offered to us for the omission, we assumed our hosts were well aware of the American EUB Church's stand against alcohol. It was likely that the European *Book of Discipline*, in contrast to the American one, had no stipulations against the use of alcohol—a national tradition in Germany. Back home, by contrast, Bishop Heininger had always been expected to speak against the dangers of alcohol.

As a non-drinker (both in America and Germany), I often found myself apologizing to hosts for not accepting beer offered to me in EUB homes. I usually explained it this way: "Because alcohol was a major problem in pioneer days in America, where there were few protections against its abuse, conscientious Christians felt called upon to abstain from alcohol altogether 'for the sake of the weak' and to take a stand against bars and saloons which were seen as destructive to family virtues and individual moral character."

Sometimes I added "Here in Germany you don't have those problems, hence you apparently know how to handle your alcohol." But their reply frequently surprised me. "No, no, no" they protested, almost vehemently. "We have a huge alcohol problem in Germany also. We wish we could change it."

At the banquet Bishop Heininger and I were satisfied with mineral water and apple juice, against which there was no law in the American EUB *Discipline*.

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